

The Sacramental Paradigm of Nature

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Earth Week is getting a lot of attention in Hyde Park. The focus is on the environmental crisis, from many perspectives: racism, law, treaty rights, war and peace, the Earth Summit, and the role of the churches as interpreted by Job Ebenezer here at LSTC right after this service. There is even one group that has engaged three very prestigious speakers from science, business, and the media to present "the case against environmentalism."

My contribution to this rather mind-boggling range of reflection asks you to ponder for a few moments what we think this earth, this world of nature, is, how we image the nature that the planet, and we as citizens of the planet, are made of. This nature, after all, constitutes the environment whose crisis is being surveyed this week, by some as a challenge for action and by others as a liberal fiction. One can hardly avoid the parallel with those who insist that the Holocaust of World War II is likewise a hoax. Nature is the stuff of the species *Homo sapiens* who has brought us to the edge of the crisis. Nature also forms the substance of all our efforts to find a way out of the crisis. It's all nature-and how do we image it? What do we think it is all about? And what difference would these images make for all of our Earth Week concern and activism?

The place I want to start with our image of nature is here at the altar, where in a few minutes we will make Eucharist together, share IN THE Supper of our Lord, bread and wine, body and blood of the Jesus whose resurrection we celebrate at Easter. We Lutherans have a very definite and much-discussed idea of what a sacrament is. It has three parts: the first is a natural element, in this case bread and wine; the second is the word of God's promise that is added to the natural element; and the third is that natural element and word of promise are used by us in the confidence that God's word will direct that nature to the purposes of grace and redemption. Nature, word of God's promise, and confident use-these define a sacrament in our tradition. And they also set forth an image of nature.

If we look at our basic 16th century documents of faith, we'll gain clarity on this image by noting what we're opposed to. We're basically opposed to three positions.

1. The view that bread and wine are not good enough to bear the promise, that they have to be changed in some way, transubstantiated.
This is the idea that nature cannot carry the promise-it's too weak.
2. The second view we reject is that bread and wine are only bread and wine, carrying no particular promise. This idea squeezes any possibility of promise right out of nature.
3. The third view insists that the presence of Christ in the bread and wine is a spiritual presence, not physical. This is the idea that the promise cannot be contaminated by contact with nature-it has to remain "spiritual" in the sense of being immaterial.

We learn a lot about what we believe about nature when we think carefully about these views that we reject.

We hold that in God's sight bread and wine are united to God's word of promise as the human Jesus was related to the divine Christ—a full union of a real human person and the real God. This all happens in a way that we cannot fully comprehend, but we insist that the human person was really human, and that the God was really God, and we reject the idea that Jesus was a freak or the product of a magical trick. This is all our traditional way of saying that nature can carry the blessing of God and in this Eucharistic liturgy we insist that nature does indeed carry that blessing.

If you want to discover this for yourself, how doggedly we Lutherans believe in this set of images, follow the intricacies of the *communicatio idiomatum* theology of Lutheran orthodoxy, as Heinrich Schmid preserves it in the fine print on a dozen or more bid pages in his "user friendly" compendium.

II.

Nature is the prime vessel, the ordinary vehicle for God's gracious promise. Nature with the word of promise, used in faith. It is that way in Genesis 1, where the wind or spirit or promise of God brooded over the waters—and we call that particular unity of nature and promise the creation.

In Genesis 2, it's dust, mud, dirt-shaped and brought to life by the breath of God—and we call that two-natured creature Adam.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the Spirit of God comes upon a natural woman who becomes very naturally pregnant, and a natural baby boy comes forth. This boy was crucified before our eyes last Friday, and resurrected in our presence early Sunday morning. And even though we divided him into two natures at Chalcedon, it was also at Chalcedon that we insisted that the truly human and the truly God are fully united in one Jesus Christ. The very images that the Formula of Concord will later employ to argue the unity of the bread and wine with Christ's body and blood.

The resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate even now is the resurrection of the body—an explicit and powerful repudiation of any notions either that our bodily selves are incapable of becoming more than dead dust or that we must become disembodied before we can receive a spiritual home. The Gospel accounts take great pains to say that a body, recognizable as Jesus of Nazareth, conquered death in the resurrection.

In Saint John's version of Pentecost, in which Jesus breathes the Spirit upon the disciples, Thomas is present as one who must make contact with the body of Jesus before he can acquiesce to the resurrection. In a marvelous exchange of words and touchings, Jesus seems to say to Thomas "Now you have seen and touched my body; you know it is the bearer of resurrection promise. But you are the last one so privileged Thomas; henceforth the promise must be borne

by your body, if people are to believe in it." John's Gospel clearly believes that in encountering the very natural community of Christians, future generations will meet Christ himself.

Luke's version of Pentecost also transpires in the word of promise attached to the varieties of human nature. The persons who received the spirit of promise were not idealized plaster saints. So human and so diverse that the onlookers could not believe what they saw. So earthy and bodily in their rapture that observers could call them drunks.

III.

We could go on and on. What's the point? That in the sacred past and also in the present, God works through nature that has been blessed with a promise, with God's word, with the outpouring of the Spirit of God. Nature is not really nature as God intended it apart from the promise. The promise of the Spirit is not real except it be embodied in a natural element.

One might say that as far as our life in the world is concerned, that's all there is: Nature existing in unity with the promise or spirit of God. Without the promise, nature is not nature; without nature, the promise is not real. If we have an image of nature without the promise of the word, we can be sure that is not God's view of nature. If we have an image of spirit or promise without the natural element, we are out of touch with God's way of being present to us.

The promise or Spirit of God tells us what the purpose of nature is-whether it's Genesis 1 or 2 or in Jesus or in our own bodies or in the church. Maybe that's why we deceive ourselves into viewing nature apart from the promise, so that we can pretend that we create the purposes for nature. It is precisely in this context of nature's purpose under God that Saint Paul speaks of natural human bodies in First Corinthians 6. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" The Spirit that brooded over the waters at creation makes all of the universe, including this planet, something that we have from God-God's, and not our own. Such a sense brought Gerard Manley Hopkins to write in his sonnet, "God's Grandeur," that however willful humans might be with the rest of nature, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs-
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

One might ask of all the Earth Week events transpiring in Hyde Park these days, the noble as well as the ignoble, whether there is a place for this Christian image of nature as a gift from God, as belonging to God, as a reservoir of freshness that is never spent, and that might indeed live on in the Spirit long after human beings have disappeared from the universe. I say this not in any attempt to inhibit or discourage action in the streets in behalf of the earth, but rather simply as a Christian image of what it is we are going into the streets to save.

IV.

What difference would it make if this image of nature derived from Scripture and the Lutheran understanding of Sacraments were really to claim our hearts and minds? Is this simply imagistic fluff? An escape into symbols when hard actions are what is really needed?

I would hope not. I would hope that we see that in this sacrament-image our calling with respect to nature is defined. We are called as natural beings placed by God in a natural world-and the whole natural process is intended as a vessel of grace. The bread and wine becoming the vessel of promise reveals to us what all of nature, including our own bodies, is designed to be.

I would hope that we see that in this sacrament-image our sin with respect to nature is defined, as well. Our sin is our forcibly trying to tear nature away from its in-breathed word of promise. Technology is not our sin, rather technology separated from the purposes of God's promise is our sin. Using nature is no more sinful than using the sacrament that is today spread before us. The sin is using nature in the drunken, lustful manner in which the Corinthians, whom Paul rebuked, used the bread and wine of the agape meal.

We also see our sanctification defined in this sacrament-image. We are sanctified in grace through all of God's natural processes, if we can discern the word of promise that God has added. In God's natural work, there is reconciliation with this beleaguered planet, with our fellow humans, and with our creator. Our sanctification enables us to see our own purpose in this world-to be sacraments of God's grace unto the rest of nature, to all that we encounter.

It's all very consistent with Romans 7 and 8. Nature viewed and used in defiance of promise that has been breathed into it by God is Law to us. Threatening, unyielding, its inexorable demands never satisfied.

Nature accepted and used as the bearer of God's promise is Gospel to us. A vessel of grace, an ambiance for our obedience, the form of our resurrected new life.

Earth Day, care of the earth, befriending the planet-it all depends on how you look at nature, what you think it's all about. We will never come closer to nature's essential character than when we eat this bread, drink this wine, and accept the promise God has placed within them.